UNITED NATIONS **E**

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
LIMITED

E/CN.17/1997/L.8
18 April 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Fifth session
8-25 April 1997
Agenda item 4

PREPARATIONS FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF AN OVERALL REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21

DIALOGUE SESSIONS WITH MAJOR GROUPS

Summary report of the dialogue session with farmers

(16 April 1997)

Chairman: Ms. Monika Linn-Locher (Switzerland), Vice-Chairman, Commission on Sustainable Development

Facilitator: Ms. Linda Elswick, World Sustainable Agriculture Association, United States of America

Presenters: Farmers representing the following organizations made presentations: Federation of Swedish Farmers; Danish Farmers' Union; National Farmers' Union, Canada; Zambian Women in Agriculture; Union Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos, Nicaragua; New Brunswick Federation of Agriculture, Canada; Centre for Citizens Initiative - Moscow, Russian Federation; and Karnataka State Farmers Association, India.

PRESENTATIONS

The Earth Summit had heightened awareness of important links among farming, environment and development. Issues concerning food and agriculture transformed the abstract concept of sustainable development into something tangible and meaningful to all people. Trade, the role of women, land tenure, resource conservation and technological development were just a few of the many issues that surfaced in the discussion between farmers and Governments.

Activities

Farmers are undertaking initiatives to promote sustainable agriculture. Some of these activities are indicated below.

- A farming programme in Denmark engaged participants at national and local levels, and allowed farmers to view themselves as an integrated part of society. That programme educated farmers and promoted good farming practices. The programme also established standards for pesticide and fertilizer use, water quality, energy consumption and research.

- Zambian women have organized a programme for women farmers that has empowered women and educated them about farming practices and management.

- With the help of an American non-governmental organization, a group in the Russian Federation developed a consultative process for farmers, with a particular focus on women farmers. That programme educated both producers and consumers about sustainable agriculture.

- Land tenure reforms, rural banks and rural women's services have helped to promote sustainable agriculture in several countries.

- Government-endorsed farmer marketing boards have been especially helpful in promoting sustainable agriculture in Canada.

Obstacles

Obstacles faced by farmers concern poverty, lack of land tenure, trade policies and attitudes towards biological diversity. Examples are given below.

- Farmers, historically, have been viewed as people who exploit the land.

- Insecure land tenure and poverty undermine sustainable farming efforts, especially in developing countries.

- Policies that favour cash crop production often promote unsustainable agriculture.

- The World Trade Organization and trade liberalization have created a watershed of adverse effects on farmers. The global market is determining what is produced, who is producing it and who has control over what is produced. Globalization of the economy has also usurped the place of instruments for ensuring food security, and moved decision-making outside of public institutions.

- For some countries, barriers to export have detrimental effects on their agricultural activities.

- Farmers find it difficult to participate in the international arena for a variety of reasons, including financial constraints.

- Vested interests in industrialized countries refuse to recognize peasants and indigenous peoples as generators, owners and guardians of biodiversity.

- The spread of urban areas threatens agriculture.

- Organic farming receives little attention and recognition from government.

Priorities

- Priorities outlined by farmers address land tenure, partnerships and trade. Examples are set forth below.

- Local solutions and long-term land tenure are imperative for sustainable agriculture.

- Farmers cannot pursue sustainable agriculture alone. Close cooperation between farmers and authorities is essential in establishing laws to govern grazing, bookkeeping, and pesticide and fertilizer use.

- Research is important for furthering agricultural practices. Consequently, farmers should enhance alliances with scientific and technical institutions.

- The effects of trade liberalization on farmers require greater attention.

DIALOGUE

Representatives of the following Governments made statements during the dialogue session: Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Peru, Philippines, United States of America. Farmers and representatives of non-governmental organizations from the floor also took part in the discussion.

One organic farmer called for increased attention to organic farming (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM)). He pointed out the increased demand for organic farming products in Austria, Switzerland and Denmark. The representative of a non-governmental organization noted that the Commission on the Status of Women supported farmers, especially organic farmers. She pointed to references to organic farming by the Fourth World Conference on Women. These references stress linkages between health and agriculture.

Several speakers emphasized problems associated with the World Trade Organization and trade liberalization. One non-governmental organization representative said that farmer marketing boards, backed by Governments, were essential for family farmers. Yet such boards are currently being challenged by the World Trade Organization (Canadian farmer). Another representative of a non-governmental organization (Bolivia) called for protection of rural farmers against free market forces. A panellist described how the World Trade Organization affected land tenure by forcing large groups to buy up smaller farms. One government representative suggested that globalization responded to

consumer demands by establishing lower prices. As an example, he pointed to decreased prices after his Government had joined the European Union (Finland).

One participant noted that the Commission on Sustainable Development in its documentation had failed to mention the Leipzig International Technical Conference on Plant Genetic Resources, efforts of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and initiatives under the Convention on Biological Diversity relevant to agriculture (India). She and others emphasized links between biodiversity and agriculture, biosafety issues and the threat of technological totalitarianism.

One government representative asked how farmers reconciled their roles as business people and guardians of the earth, especially in the third world. He asked about the possibility of having these two roles coincide, especially in the third world (Germany). A panellist responded that legislation was required to help mesh the farmer's different roles. A farmer representing a third world Government stated that the free trade rules were annihilating peasant households because those rules focused on huge environmental subsidies. One government representative considered that the trade rules needed to be rewritten to encourage sustainable agriculture (India).

One government representative asked whether the world's farmers would be capable of feeding the increasing world population. In response, farmers noted the role of technology and local agriculture. One non-governmental organization representative pointed out that the question was one concerning not the quantity of food, but rather its distribution.

One government representative recognized the negative public image of farmers in some countries. He asked whether farmer/consumer group partnerships would be productive (Ireland). A panellist suggested that what consumers said and what they bought were two different matters.

One representative noted that many people in rural communities were landless but contributed to food production as farm workers. He urged Governments to address hunger and undernourishment and stressed that each household unit must be able to meet daily food requirements (Philippines).

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Some challenges and recommendations are presented below.

- The international community should take a more comprehensive approach to food security by involving representatives from all sectors of society.

- Increased interaction between the United Nations and the World Trade Organization is needed.

- The Commission on Sustainable Development should facilitate approval of the Global Plan of Action and the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources as a protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity. This

requires immediate finalization of the revision to the International Undertaking as a protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

- There is a need to review, assess and, if necessary, modify existing national legislation and international agreements concerning intellectual property rights, land tenure and seed legislation (also post-World Trade Organization legislation) to ensure that they support and do not run counter to farmers' rights and to the overarching objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

- The WTO review process in 1999-2000 should lead to removal of agriculture from the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations agreements and to the elimination of trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPs) in agriculture.

- There should be a moratorium on bioprospecting activities.

- There should be a moratorium on the release of genetically modified plant varieties and organisms.

- Developed countries and agribusinesses should provide compensation for the developing-country knowledge and resources that they have been using for many years.

- The Commission on Sustainable Development should promote the establishment of a permanent working group on farmers' rights, biodiversity and sustainable agriculture.

- An international convention to address farmer's rights and sustainable agriculture issues would help to build accountability within the structure of international law.

- The Commission on Sustainable Development should arrange for consultative status for farmers as a major group by the time of the special session of the General Assembly.